

# FDA Unit Pursues Illegal Web Pharmacies

**D**on't order medicines from web sites that claim to be Canadian pharmacies. Most are not legitimate pharmacies, and the drugs they supply are illegal and potentially dangerous.

Claiming to be a Canadian pharmacy is one of the hallmarks of Internet sites that sell illegal prescription drugs which, in many cases, are not made in Canada at all, but in a number of other countries. (Even if an online Canadian pharmacy is legitimate, in general, U.S. citizens cannot legally import prescription drugs from other countries. But that's a separate issue. We're talking here about fraud.)

There are many other false claims being made, but this one figured prominently in the June 2013 seizure of hundreds of rogue pharmacy websites.

This is according to Special Agent Daniel Burke, senior operations manager in FDA's Cybercrimes Investigations Unit, a special team created in March 2013 in the agency's Office of Criminal Investigations (OCI). Cybercrimes are illegal acts involving a computer and a network.

This unit works with other domestic and international agencies to track down the operators and suppliers of web sites that illegally sell prescription medicines. The agents' methods include high-tech detection in which they follow the cyber-trail of these



pharmacies, and go undercover to infiltrate the criminal world.

Burke explains that medicines offered by these sites are often stolen or counterfeit. An unsuspecting consumer may be buying a medicine that does not have the active ingredient that will make it effective, or it may have undisclosed ingredients that could endanger their health or even be life-threatening.

"Consumers are able to buy prescription drugs, unapproved drugs

and potentially counterfeit drugs without a full understanding of the risks that they take when they do that," says OCI Director John Roth. "What worries me is that people naively believe that these medicines are safe."

## Illegal Pharmacy Websites Seized

In June, FDA—working with international regulatory and law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Attorney's Office in Denver, Colo-

*Burke estimates that there are 40,000 to 60,000 domain names that could be tied to illegal online pharmacies at any given time, and that this number is in a constant state of flux.*

rado—seized and shut down 1,677 illegal pharmacy websites. Many of the websites appeared to be operated by a criminal network that represented itself as various Canadian pharmacies.

The medicines sold on these websites were described as “brand name” or “FDA-approved” when they were neither. Products purchased by federal agents bypassed safety controls required by FDA, including that they be used with a valid prescription and under the supervision of a licensed health care provider.

Some of the illegal sites used the names of well-known U.S. retailers to trick consumers into believing that there was an affiliation with those stores. Examples include [www.walgreens-store.com](http://www.walgreens-store.com) and [www.c-v-pharmacy.com](http://www.c-v-pharmacy.com).

The banner of FDA’s Cybercrimes Investigation Unit is now displayed on the seized sites to identify them as illegal.

Burke says it was dogged online detective work by federal investigators who monitored site traffic, “followed the money trail,” and tracked the bogus sites back to an operation based overseas. An estimated 10,000 such sites are believed to be part of this network, he says. The U.S. investigators turned over their findings to local authorities via the international police organization Interpol.

### Undercover Investigations

Burke estimates that there are 40,000 to 60,000 domain names that could be tied to illegal online pharmacies at any given time, and that this number is in a constant state of flux. (A domain name is used to identify and locate computers on the Internet.)

He and other operatives have gone undercover in other countries, with the cooperation of foreign law enforcement, to lure out the suppliers of these illegal medicines and to track down the site operators.

The drugs that these rogue pharmacies sell typically come from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and South and Central America. The site operators are in the U.S. and all over the world. FDA coordinates its investigations with law enforcement agencies in many other countries, Burke explains. In some cases, the suspects are turned over to authorities in the country in which they were based; in other cases they are extradited to the United States for prosecution.

FDA is expanding its law enforcement presence overseas as well. In 2014, the first permanent OCI agent overseas will begin an assignment at Europol—the European Union’s law enforcement agency—in The Netherlands.

### Consumer Advice

Websites that illegally sell prescription drugs also potentially present

non-health related risks, such as identity theft, computer viruses or credit card fraud. FDA asks consumers to report suspected criminal activity at [www.fda.gov/oci](http://www.fda.gov/oci).

FDA provides information on how consumers can identify a fake online pharmacy and offers advice on how to find a safe online pharmacy at the “BeSafeRx: Know Your Online Pharmacy” website: [www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinesOverTheInternet/BeSafeRxKnowYourOnlinePharmacy/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinesOverTheInternet/BeSafeRxKnowYourOnlinePharmacy/default.htm)

“Consumers should also beware of offers that some sites make to attract customers, such as offering a commission or a referral bonus for bringing in new customers. They might offer ‘bonus pills’ with a purchase,” says Burke. “They’re unscrupulous.”

Find this and other Consumer Updates at [www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates](http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates)

Sign up for free e-mail subscriptions at [www.fda.gov/consumer/consumerenews.html](http://www.fda.gov/consumer/consumerenews.html)